KILLING THE BLACK BODY

RACE, REPRODUCTION, AND THE MEANING OF LIBERTY

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To my precious children, Amilcar, Camilo, and Yaosca

Introduction

The painful, patient, and silent toil of mothers to gain a fee simple title to the bodies of their daughters, the despairing fight, as of an entrapped tigress, to keep hallowed their own persons, would furnish material for epics.

ANNA JULIA COOPER, 1893[1]

In 1989, officials in Charleston, South Carolina, initiated a policy of arresting pregnant women whose prenatal tests revealed they were smoking crack. In some cases, a team of police tracked down expectant mothers in the city's poorest neighborhoods. In others, officers invaded the maternity ward to haul away patients in handcuffs and leg irons, hours after giving birth. One woman spent the final weeks of pregnancy detained in a dingy cell in the Charleston County Jail. When she went into labor, she was transported in chains to the hospital, and remained shackled to the bed during the entire delivery. All but one of the four dozen women arrested for prenatal crimes in Charleston were Black.

We are in the midst of an explosion of rhetoric and policies that degrade Black women's reproductive decisions. Poor Black mothers are blamed for perpetuating social problems by transmitting defective genes, irreparable crack damage, and a deviant lifestyle to their children. A controversial editorial in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* suggested coerced contraception as a solution to the Black underclass. Noting that "[t]he main reason more black children are living in poverty is that the people having the most children are the ones least capable of supporting them," the editorial proposed reducing the number of children born to poor Black women by implanting them with the long-acting contraceptive Norplant. This thinking was supported by the best-selling book *The Bell Curve*, which claims that social disparities stem from the higher fertility rates of genetically less intelligent groups, including Blacks.

Along with this disparagement of Black motherhood, policymakers have initiated a new wave of reproductive regulation. The targeting of

Black women who use drugs during pregnancy is only one example. State legislatures across the country are considering measures designed to keep women on welfare from having babies—a goal also advanced by Newt Gingrich's Contract with America and then incorporated in the newly enacted federal welfare law. The plans range from denying benefits to children born to welfare mothers to mandatory insertion of Norplant as a condition of receiving aid. Many family-planning clinics, with the support of Medicaid, are already encouraging young Black women to keep the risky device implanted in their arms. The emerging agenda is reminiscent of government-sponsored programs as late as the 1970s that coerced poor Black women by the thousands into being sterilized. Meanwhile, a fertility business devoted to helping white middle-class couples to have children is booming.

How can we possibly confront racial injustice in America without tackling this assault on Black women's procreative freedom? How can we possibly talk about reproductive health policy without addressing race, as well as gender? Yet books on racial justice tend to neglect the subject of reproductive rights; and books on reproductive freedom tend to neglect the influence of race. Few, if any, have addressed the many dimensions of governmental regulation of Black women's childbearing or the impact this repression has had on the way Americans think about reproductive liberty.

The story I tell about reproductive rights differs dramatically from the standard one. In contrast to the account of American women's increasing control over their reproductive decisions, centered on the right to an abortion, this book describes a long experience of dehumanizing attempts to control Black women's reproductive lives. The systematic, institutionalized denial of reproductive freedom has uniquely marked Black women's history in America. Considering this history—from slave masters' economic stake in bonded women's fertility to the racist strains of early birth control policy to sterilization abuse of Black women during the 1960s and 1970s to the current campaign to inject Norplant and Depo-Provera in the arms of Black teenagers and welfare mothers—paints a powerful picture of the link between race and reproductive freedom in America.

Several years ago I spoke at a forum in a neighborhood church entitled "Civil Rights Under Attack: Recent Supreme Court Decisions," sponsored by several civil rights organizations. I chose to focus on how the Supreme Court's decision in *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services*, which weakened the holding in *Roe v. Wade* and denied women a

right to abortion in publicly funded hospitals, hurt Black women. I linked the decision to a series of current attacks on Black women's reproductive autonomy, including the growing trend to prosecute poor Black mothers for smoking crack while pregnant. When it came time for questions, I was immediately assailed by a man in the audience for risking solidarity around racial issues by interjecting the controversial issue of reproduction. He thought it was dangerous to mention the word "abortion." He said that reproductive rights was a "white woman's issue," and he advised me to stick to traditional civil rights concerns, such as affirmative action, voting rights, and criminal justice.

While this man felt that the civil rights agenda should leave out reproductive health concerns, the mainstream reproductive rights agenda has neglected Black women's concerns. Public and scholarly debate about reproductive freedom has centered on abortion, often ignoring other important reproductive health policies that are most likely to affect Black women. Yet I came to grasp the importance of women's reproductive autonomy, not from the mainstream abortion rights movement, but from studying the lives of slave women, like those described by Anna Julia Cooper, who fought to retain control over their reproductive lives. The feminist focus on gender and identification of male domination as the source of reproductive repression often overlooks the importance of racism in shaping our understanding of reproductive liberty and the degree of "choice" that women really have.

I want this book to convince readers that reproduction is an important topic and that it is especially important to Black people. It is important not only because the policies I discuss keep Black women from having children but because these policies persuade people that racial inequality is perpetuated by Black people themselves. The belief that Black procreation is the problem remains a major barrier to radical change in America. It is my hope that by exposing its multiple reincarnations, this book will help to put this dangerous fallacy to rest. I also want this book to convince readers to think about reproduction in a new way. These policies affect not only Black Americans but also the very meaning of reproductive freedom.

My objective is to place these issues in their broader political context by exploring how the denial of Black reproductive autonomy serves the interests of white supremacy. I am also interested in the way in which the dominant understanding of reproductive rights has been shaped by racist assumptions about Black procreation. Three

central themes, then, run through the chapters of this book. The first is that *regulating Black women's reproductive decisions has been a central aspect of racial oppression in America.* Not only do these policies injure individual Black women, but they also are a principal means of justifying the perpetuation of a racist social structure. Second, *the control of Black women's reproduction has shaped the meaning of reproductive liberty in America.* The traditional understanding of reproductive freedom has had to accommodate practices that blatantly deny Black women control over critical decisions about their bodies. Highlighting the racial dimensions of contemporary debates such as welfare reform, the safety of Norplant, public funding of abortion, and the morality of new reproductive technologies is like shaking up a kaleidoscope and taking another look.

Finally, in light of the first two themes, *we need to reconsider the meaning of reproductive liberty to take into account its relationship to racial oppression.* While Black women's stories are sometimes inserted as an aside in deliberations about reproductive issues, I place them at the center of this reconstructive project. How does Black women's experience change the current interpretation of reproductive freedom? The dominant notion of reproductive liberty is flawed in several ways. It is limited by the liberal ideals of individual autonomy and freedom from government interference; it is primarily concerned with the interests of white, middle-class women; and it is focused on the right to abortion. The full extent of many Americans' conception of reproductive freedom is the Constitution's protection against laws that ban abortion. I suggest an expanded and less individualistic conception of reproductive liberty that recognizes control of reproduction as a critical means of racial oppression and liberation in America. I do not deny the importance of autonomy over one's own reproductive life, but I also recognize that reproductive policy affects the status of entire groups. Reproductive liberty must encompass more than the protection of an individual woman's choice to end her pregnancy. It must encompass the full range of procreative activities, including the ability to bear a child, and it must acknowledge that we make reproductive decisions within a social context, including inequalities of wealth and power. *Reproductive freedom is a matter of social justice,* not individual choice.

Black women's earliest experience in America was one of brutal denial of autonomy over reproduction. In Chapter 1, I describe the exploitation of slave women's capacity to produce more slaves and the denial of their rights as mothers. After Emancipation, racism continued to corrupt notions of reproductive liberty, helping to direct the birth control movement which emerged early in this century. Chapter 2 explores the alliances between birth control advocates and eugenicists during the 1920s and 1930s, as well as the rampant sterilization abuse of Black women in later decades. It also considers the debate about family planning and genocide that took place within the Black community throughout this period. In Chapters 3 through 5, I demonstrate that a panoply of policies continue to degrade Black women's reproductive decisions. Plans to distribute Norplant in Black communities as a means of addressing their poverty, law enforcement practices that penalize Black women for bearing a child, and welfare reform measures that cut off assistance for children born to welfare mothers all proclaim the same message: The key to solving America's social problems is to curtail Black women's birth rates. In Chapter 6, I argue that race also determines the use and popularity of technologies designed to enable people to have children.

Finally, Chapter 7 presents a reconception of liberty that takes into account this relationship between race and reproduction. The book ends by proposing an approach to reproductive rights that acknowledges the complementary and overlapping qualities of the Constitution's guarantees of liberty and equality. This approach recognizes the connection between the dehumanization of the individual and the repression of the group. It provides a positive claim to state support for poor women's procreative decisions that counters proposals to cut funding both for children born to women on welfare and for abortion. It also adds a compelling dimension to the feminist claim that reproductive liberty is essential to women's political and social citizenship. Thus, I hope to show that, while racism has perverted dominant notions of reproductive freedom, the quest to secure Black women's reproductive autonomy can transform the meaning of liberty for everyone.

The greatest risk in writing a book about reproductive domination is that it will leave the false impression that Black women have been no more than passive puppets in a unidimensional plot to control their actions. I try to avoid that perception by showing throughout this book Black women's activism in the struggle to control their own bodies. The full story of Black women's resistance and its impact on the national movement for reproductive freedom is long overdue. As Anna Julia Cooper recognized a century ago, this "fight, as of an entrapped tigress, . . . would furnish material for epics."

"BEARERS OF 'INCURABLE IMMORALITY'"

Before turning to the history of reproductive regulation, it is important to recognize the images of Black women that form its backdrop. America has always viewed unregulated Black reproduction as dangerous. For three centuries, Black mothers have been thought to pass down to their offspring the traits that marked them as inferior to any white person. Along with this biological impairment, it is believed that Black mothers transfer a deviant lifestyle to their children that dooms each succeeding generation to a life of poverty, delinquency, and despair. A persistent objective of American social policy has been to monitor and restrain this corrupting tendency of Black motherhood.

Regulating Black women's fertility seems so imperative because of the powerful stereotypes that propel these policies. A popular mythology that portrays Black women as unfit to be mothers has left a lasting impression on the American psyche. Although these attitudes are not universally held, they influence the way many Americans think about reproduction. Myths are more than made-up stories. They are also firmly held beliefs that represent and attempt to explain what we perceive to be the truth. They can become more credible than reality, holding fast even in the face of airtight statistics and rational argument to the contrary. American culture is replete with derogatory icons of Black women—Jezebel, Mammy, Tragic Mulatto, Aunt Jemima, Sapphire, Matriarch, and Welfare Queen. Over the centuries these myths have made Black women seem like "nothing more than the bearers of 'incurable immorality.'"[2] In this introduction, I focus on those images that have justified the restrictions on Black women's childbearing explored in subsequent chapters.

Reproduction as Degeneracy

The degrading mythology about Black mothers is one aspect of a complex set of stereotypes that deny Black humanity in order to rationalize white supremacy.[3] The white founding fathers justified their exclusion of Blacks from the new republic by imbuing them with a set of attributes that made them unfit for citizenship. The men who crafted the nation's government, such as Thomas Jefferson, claimed that Blacks lacked the capacity for rational thought, independence, and self-control that was essential for self-governance.[4] Racist thinking dictates that Black bodies, intellect, character, and culture are all inherently vulgar.[5] It reflects a pattern of oppositional categories in which whites are associated with positive characteristics (industrious, intelligent, responsible), while Blacks are associated with the opposite, negative qualities (lazy, ignorant, shiftless).[6] These disparaging stereotypes of Black people all proclaim a common message: it is the depraved, self-perpetuating character of Blacks themselves that leads to their inferior social status.

Scientific racism understands racial variation as a biological distinction that determines superiority and inferiority.[7] Only a theory rooted in nature could systematically account for the anomaly of slavery existing in a republic founded on a radical commitment to liberty, equality, and natural rights. Whites invented the hereditary trait of race and endowed it with the concept of racial superiority and inferiority to resolve the contradiction between slavery and liberty. Scientific racism explained domination by one group over another as the natural order of things: Blacks were biologically destined to be slaves, and whites were destined to be their masters. It also forged an indelible link between race and policies governing reproduction. Because race was defined as an inheritable trait, preserving racial distinctions required policing reproduction. *Reproductive politics in America inevitably involves racial politics.*

As both biological and social reproducers, it is only natural that Black mothers would be a key focus of this racist ideology. White childbearing is generally thought to be a beneficial activity: it brings personal joy and allows the nation to flourish. Black reproduction, on the other hand, is treated as a form of *degeneracy*. Black mothers are seen to corrupt the reproduction process at every stage. Black mothers, it is believed, transmit inferior physical traits to the product of conception through their genes. They damage their babies in the womb through their bad habits during pregnancy. Then they impart a deviant lifestyle to their children through their example. This damaging behavior on the part of Black mothers—not arrangements of power—explains the persistence of Black poverty and marginality. Thus it warrants strict measures to control Black women's childbearing rather than wasting resources on useless social programs.

George Frederickson's description of the rationale for Jim Crow laws parallels the welfare and crime reform rhetoric we hear today:

> If the blacks were a degenerating race with no future, the problem ceased to be one of how to prepare them for citizenship or

even how to make them more productive and useful members of the community. The new prognosis pointed rather to the need to segregate or quarantine a race liable to be a source of contamination and social danger to the white community, as it sank ever deeper into the slough of disease, vice, and criminality.[8]

Blaming Black mothers, then, is a way of subjugating the Black race as a whole. At the same time, devaluing motherhood is particularly damaging to Black women. As Simone de Beauvoir wrote in *The Second Sex*, "It was as Mother that woman was fearsome; it is in maternity that she must be transfigured and enslaved." [9] Being a mother is considered a woman's major social role. Society defines all women as mothers or potential mothers. Motherhood is compulsory for women: most little girls expect to become mothers, and women who do not are considered deviant. Because women have been defined in terms of motherhood, devaluing this aspect of a woman's identity is especially devastating. It cuts to the heart of what it means to be valued as a woman.

Jezebel and the Immoral Black Mother

From the moment they set foot in this country as slaves, Black women have fallen outside the American ideal of womanhood.[10] This contradiction became especially pronounced during the Victorian era. The nineteenth-century image of the True Woman was delicate, refined, and chaste. Although she was considered physically and intellectually inferior to men, she was morally superior to them. She was perfectly suited to the home, where she served as mother and wife. All of her attributes were precisely the opposite of those that characterized Black women. "Judged by the evolving nineteenth-century ideology of femininity," Black activist Angela Davis observed, "Black women were practically anomalies." [11]

Not only were Black women exiled from the norm of true womanhood, but their maternity was blamed for Black people's problems. Contrary to the ideal white mother, Black mothers had their own repertory of images that portrayed them as immoral, careless, domineering, and devious.

One of the most prevalent images of slave women was the character of Jezebel, named after the biblical wife of King Ahab. Jezebel was a purely lascivious creature: not only was she governed by her

erotic desires, but her sexual prowess led men to wanton passion.[12] As early as 1736, the South Carolina *Gazette* described "African Ladies" as women "of 'strong robust constitution' who were 'not easily jaded out' but able to serve their lovers 'by Night as well as Day.' " Jezebel was diametrically opposed to the prevailing vision of the True Woman, who was chaste, pure, and white. As an unidentified Southern white woman wrote in *The Independent* in 1904, "I cannot imagine such a creature as a virtuous black woman." [13] This construct of the licentious temptress served to justify white men's sexual abuse of Black women. The stereotype of Black women as sexually promiscuous also defined them as bad mothers.

The myth of the lascivious Black woman was systematically perpetuated after slavery ended.[14] While white women were placed on moral pedestals, "[e]very black woman was, by definition, a slut according to this racist mythology," writes historian Gerda Lerner. Lerner notes a number of practices that reinforced this view: "the laws against intermarriage; the denial of the title 'Miss' or 'Mrs.' to any black woman; the taboos against respectable social mixing of the races; the refusal to let black women customers try on clothing in stores before making a purchase; the assigning of a single toilet to both sexes of Blacks." [15]

Historian Philip A. Bruce's book *The Plantation Negro as a Freeman*, published in 1889, strengthened popular views of both Black male and Black female degeneracy. True to the "retrogressionist" ideology of the time, Bruce argued that, without the moral discipline imposed by slave masters, free Blacks were regressing to their naturally immoral state.[16] He devoted two chapters to an exposition of Black women's lascivious impulses, which he claimed had been loosened by Emancipation. Bruce explained Blacks' sexual promiscuity by the fact that "the procreative instinct being the most passionate that nature has implanted" was especially potent in Negroes. He traced the alleged propensity of the Black man to rape white women to "the sexual laxness of plantation women as a class." [17] According to Bruce, Black men lacked any understanding of sexual violation because their women were always eager to engage in sex.

Bruce explicitly tied Black women's sexual impurity to their dangerous mothering. He reasoned that Black women's promiscuity not only provoked Black men to rape white women but also led the entire Black family into depravity. Black women raised their children to follow their own licentious lifestyle: "[T]heir mothers do not endeavor to teach them, systematically, those moral lessons that they peculiarly

need as members of the female sex; they learn to sew in a rude way, to wash, to iron, and to cook, but no principle is steadily instilled that makes them solicitous and resolute to preserve their reputations untarnished." [18] Because it was women who "really molded the institution of marriage among the plantation negroes," Bruce explained, "to them its present degradation is chiefly ascribable." Other authors of the period similarly blamed the immoral example set by Black mothers for Black criminality. For example, Howard Odum, a professor at the University of North Carolina, wrote a chapter, "The Home Life, Diseases and Morals of the Negro," in which he attributed Blacks' poor home life partly to the sexual and domestic laxity of Black mothers.[19] Decadent Black mothers, then, were responsible for the menace that Blacks posed for American social order.

A corollary of the myth of Black promiscuity is the belief that Black women procreate with abandon. According to a prominent treatise on reproductive behavior published in 1958, most Blacks regarded "coitus . . . as [an] inevitable, natural, and desirable activity to be enjoyed both in and out of marriage; contraception is little known and considered at best a nuisance and at worst dangerous or unnatural; and pregnancy is accepted as an inevitable part of life." [20]

The myth of Black people's innate hyperfertility has been given currency by J. Philippe Rushton, a psychology professor at the University of Western Ontario. In *Race, Evolution, and Behavior: A Life History Perspective*, recently reviewed with *The Bell Curve* in the *New York Times Book Review*, Rushton traces the evolutionary origins of physical differences between the races, including brain and genital size.[21] Blacks adapted to Africa's unpredictable environment, he argues, by developing high fertility rates, bearing more children but nurturing each one less. Rushton claims that Black women ovulate more often and mature sexually faster than white women while "sperm competition" among sexually indiscriminate Black males "leads to enlarged penises and testes to make deeper and more voluminous ejaculations possible." Rushton denied he was a racist to *Rolling Stone* reporter Adam Miller, saying, "it's a trade-off; more brain or more penis. You can't have everything." [22] While Rushton's propositions may be extreme, the view of unrestrained Black childbearing is commonly held and bolsters efforts to impose family-planning regimes on Black communities. Lacking the inclination to control their own fertility, it is thought, Black women require government regulation.

Mammy and the Negligent Black Mother

If the "bad" Black Jezebel represented the opposite of the ideal mother, the asexual and maternal Mammy was the embodiment of the ideal Black woman. The image of Mammy was based on the Black female house servant who cared for her master's children. Pictured as rotund and handkerchiefed, Mammy was both the perfect mother and the perfect slave: whites saw her as a "passive nurturer, a mother figure who gave all without expectation of return, who not only acknowledged her inferiority to whites but who loved them." [23] It is important to recognize, however, that Mammy did not reflect any virtue in Black motherhood. The ideology of Mammy placed no value on Black women as the mothers of their own children. Rather, whites claimed Mammy's total devotion to the master's children, without regard to the fate of Mammy's own offspring. What's more, Mammy, while she cared for the master's children, remained under the constant supervision of her white mistress.[24] She had no real authority over either the white children she raised or the Black children she bore.

During the Jim Crow era, Mammy became a cult figure. In a period of brutal racial repression her image served as a valuable symbol of a good Black woman. White citizens created a "Black Mammy Memorial Association" in Athens, Georgia, in 1910 to solicit support for a Black vocational school modeled after Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute. The association's promotional pamphlet asked, "Did you not have an 'Old Black Mammy' who loved and cared for you?" The "Black Mammy Memorial Institute," named by the chancellor of the University of Georgia, was established to train the Negro "in the arts and industries that made the 'old Black Mammy' valuable and worthy . . . where men and women learn to work, how to work and to love their work." [25]

Mammy also appeared in great American novels, including works by Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, William Faulkner, and Robert Penn Warren. She was embodied in Aunt Jemima for the Chicago Columbia Exposition in 1893 and appeared on pancake boxes for decades.[26] Perhaps the best evidence of Mammy's rise to cult figure status was her prominence in American motion pictures, which usually portrayed her as inept, subservient, and comical.[27] Hattie McDaniel won an Oscar for her memorable 1939 performance as Scarlett O'Hara's Mammy in *Gone with the Wind*.

While whites adored Mammy, who dutifully nurtured white children, they portrayed Black slave mothers as careless and unable to care for their *own* children. Whites described Black women as bad mothers not only because of immorality but also because of incompetence. The scapegoating of Black mothers dates back to slavery days, when mothers were blamed for the devastating effects of bondage on their children. When a one-month-old slave girl named Harriet died in the Abbeville District of South Carolina on December 9, 1849, the census marshal reported the cause of death as "[s]mothered by carelessness of [her] mother." [28] This report's attribution of a Black infant death to accidental suffocation by the mother was typical of the U.S. census mortality schedules in the South. Census marshal Charles M. Pelot explained: "I wish it to be distinctly understood that nearly all the accidents occur in the negro population, which goes clearly to prove their great carelessness & total inability to take care of themselves." It now appears that the true cause of these deaths was infant illness, due to the hard physical work, poor nutrition, and abuse that their mothers endured during pregnancy.[29]

Whites believed that Black mothers needed the moral guidance that slavery once afforded. Eleanor Tayleur, for example, argued that deprived of the intimate contact with their morally superior white mistresses, freed Black women displayed uncontrolled passion and ignorance. "The modern negro woman," Tayleur complained, "has no such object-lesson in morality or modesty, and she wants none." According to Tayleur, Black women exhibited a purely animal passion toward their children, which often led to horrible abuses:

> When they are little, she indulges them blindly when she is in good humor, and beats them cruelly when she is angry; and once past their childhood her affection for them appears to be exhausted. She exhibits none of the brooding mother-love and anxiety which the white woman sends after her children as long as they live. Infanticide is not regarded as a crime among negroes, but it is so appallingly common that if the statistics could be obtained on this subject they would send a shudder through the world.[30]

The conception of Black women as unfit for motherhood was reinforced by their working lives. The virtuous mother depended on her husband for support, while women who worked for wages were considered deviant and neglectful. The conception of motherhood confined to the home and opposed to wage labor never applied to Black women. While Victorian roles required white women to be nurturing mothers, dutiful housekeepers, and gentle companions to their husbands, slave women's role required backbreaking work in the fields.

Even after Emancipation, political and economic conditions forced many Black mothers to earn a living outside the home.[31] At the turn of the century nearly all Black women worked long days as sharecroppers, laundresses, or domestic servants in white people's homes. There was a dramatic racial disparity among married women who worked for wages at that time. In 1870, in the rural South, more than 40 percent of married Black women had jobs, mostly as field laborers, while over 98 percent of white wives were homemakers.[32] In Southern cities, Black married women worked outside the home five times more often than white married women.

The demands of work within white homes undermined Black women's own roles as mothers and homemakers.[33] Black domestics returned home late at night (if not on weekends alone) and had to entrust their young children to the care of a neighbor, relative, or older sibling. Sometimes older children had to be left to wander the neighborhood. The great civil rights leader W. E. B. Du Bois, a passionate defender of Black women's honor, recognized the irony of Mammy's care for white children rather than her own. "Let the present-day mammies suckle their own children. Let them walk in the sunshine with their own toddling boys and girls and put their own sleepy little brothers and sisters to bed," he declared in a 1912 issue of his monthly paper, *The Crisis*.[34] Americans have expected Black mothers to look like Aunt Jemima—dressed in an apron and headrag and working in a white family's kitchen. American culture reveres no Black madonna. It upholds no popular image of a Black mother tenderly nurturing her child.

The Matriarch and the Black Unwed Mother

White sociologists during the 1920s and 1930s elaborated on the theory of a Negro pathology stemming from sexual depravity by focusing on family structure. Sociological studies of Black family life claimed that Black women's independence promoted Black male jealousy and irresponsibility.[35] In *The Negro Family in the United States*, Black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier reiterated the thesis that dominant Black women, by perpetuating the slave legacy of unwed moth-

erhood, were the cause of family instability.[36] Frazier saw Black people's redemption in their adoption of white family patterns. These sociologists held Black families up against a white middle-class model and declared that they were defective.

This theory was reincarnated in the 1960s in the myth of the Black matriarch, the domineering female head of the Black family. White sociologists once again held Black mothers responsible for the disintegration of the Black family and the consequent failure of Black people to achieve success in America. This thinking held that Black matriarchs damaged their families in two ways: they demoralized Black men and they transmitted a pathological lifestyle to their children, perpetuating poverty and antisocial behavior from one generation to the next.

Daniel Patrick Moynihan popularized this thesis in his 1965 report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*.[37] Moynihan, then assistant secretary of labor and director of the Office of Policy Planning and Research under President Lyndon Johnson, argued that reforming the Black family was vital to President Johnson's War on Poverty. Playing on the theme of degeneracy, Moynihan described Black culture as a "tangle of pathology" that is "capable of perpetuating itself without assistance from the white world." The chief culprit, Moynihan asserted, was Blacks' matriarchal family structure. According to Moynihan:

> At the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of the Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family. It is the fundamental cause of the weakness of the Negro community. . . . In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure, which, because it is so out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole.

Moynihan thus endowed poor Black women—the most subordinated members of society—with the power of a matriarch.

The last two decades have witnessed a revival of this castigation of Black single mothers. In a 1986 CBS special report, "The Vanishing Family: Crisis in Black America," host Bill Moyers lent liberal authority to Americans' fears about the moral depravity of Black childbearing.[38] The report featured scenes from a housing project in Newark, where young welfare mothers and the estranged fathers of their children epitomized the Black stereotypes of sexual promiscuity

and laziness. Recent rhetoric casts single motherhood literally as the cause of all social problems. According to American Enterprise Institute fellow Charles Murray, "Illegitimacy is the most important social problem of our time—more important than crime, drugs, poverty, illiteracy, welfare, or homelessness because it drives everything else."[39] Former education secretary William Bennett called it "the single most destructive social pathology in modern American society."[40]

While Blacks have the highest rate of unwed motherhood, the rate among whites has grown most dramatically, from 3 percent to 22 percent since 1965.[41] Today, there are more white babies than Black babies born to single mothers. Still, single motherhood is viewed as a Black cultural trait that is creeping into white homes. "White illegitimacy was generally not perceived as a 'cultural' or racial defect, or as a public expense, so the stigma suffered by the white unwed mother was individual and familial," Rickie Solinger observes in her history of single pregnancy between World War II and *Roe v. Wade*.[42] Black unwed motherhood, on the other hand, was seen as a major social problem: "Black women, illegitimately pregnant, were not shamed but simply blamed. . . . There was no redemption possible for these women, only the retribution of sterilization, harassment by welfare officials, and public policies that threatened to starve them." Charles Murray hammered in this point in his *Wall Street Journal* editorial, "The Coming White Underclass," which warns white Americans that their rising illegitimacy rate threatens to spread to white neighborhoods the same crime, drugs, and "drop out from the labor force" that now infects Black communities.[43]

The Welfare Queen and the Devious Black Mother

The myths about immoral, neglectful, and domineering Black mothers have been supplemented by the contemporary image of the welfare queen—the lazy mother on public assistance who deliberately breeds children at the expense of taxpayers to fatten her monthly check. The picture of reckless Black fertility is made all the more frightening by a more devious notion of Black women's childbearing. Poor Black mothers do not simply procreate irresponsibly; they purposely have more and more children to manipulate taxpayers into giving them more money. A 1990 study found that 78 percent of white Americans thought that Blacks preferred to live on welfare.[44] In a chapter of *Welfare Mothers Speak Out*, entitled "Welfare Mythology,"

the Milwaukee County Welfare Rights Organization depicts a common sentiment about welfare mothers:

> You give those lazy, shiftless good-for-nothings an inch and they'll take a mile. You have to make it tougher on them. They're getting away with murder now. You have to catch all those cheaters and put them to work or put them in jail. Get them off the welfare rolls. I'm tired of those niggers coming to our state to get on welfare. I'm tired of paying their bills just so they can sit around home having babies, watching their color televisions, and driving Cadillacs.[45]

Bob Grant, the popular New York radio talk show host, appealed to his listeners' stereotypes by imitating a welfare mother, using an exaggerated Black accent: " 'I don't have no job, how'm I gonna feed my family?' I wonder if they've ever figured out how they multiply like that," Grant railed over the airwaves. "It's like maggots on a hot day. You look one minute and there are so many there, and you look again and, wow, they've tripled!"[46] Grant calls his welfare reform proposal the "Bob Grant Mandatory Sterilization Act."

Modern-day racist ideology, then, seems to have shed the assumption that Black people are entirely incapable of rational decisionmaking. Rather, Blacks are more likely to be blamed for the poor choices they make. Charles Murray, for example, argued in *Losing Ground* that Black Americans' deviant family structure stemmed from Black women's rational responses to welfare incentives.[47] Black mothers are portrayed less as inept or reckless reproducers in need of moral supervision, and more as calculating parasites deserving of harsh discipline.

According to this view, far from helping children, welfare payments to Black single mothers merely encourage their transgenerational pathology. As Princeton English professor Wahneema Lubiano powerfully depicts this rhetoric, "She is the agent of destruction, the creator of the pathological, black, urban, poor family from which all ills flow; a monster creating crack dealers, addicts, muggers, and rapists—men who become those things because of being immersed in *her* culture of poverty."[48] The media often connect the welfare debate to notorious cases of neglectful mothers, leaving the impression that all welfare mothers squander their benefits on their own bad habits rather than caring for their children. In February 1994, Chicago police conducting a raid found nineteen barely clothed Black children

living in a filthy, rat- and roach-infested apartment with little more to nourish them than cans of corn and Kool-Aid. The mothers of these children were five sisters who were all unmarried and living on welfare.

"The Chicago 19" soon became the leading portrait of families supported by welfare.[49] As President Bill Clinton announced his proposals for welfare reform, for example, ABC's *World News Tonight* ran footage of the story as the backdrop. A reporter introduced the topic of welfare reform by stating, "Here's an example of the problem. When the police found nineteen children living in squalor in a Chicago apartment last winter, it was a shocking symbol of all that is wrong with the system. Their mothers received more than $5,000 a month in welfare." This bizarre family came to represent welfare mothers rather than the far more representative women who devote themselves to making ends meet for the sake of their children.

THE NEW BIO-UNDERCLASS

Along with these disparaging images of Black mothers, the media increasingly portray Black children as incapable of contributing anything positive to society. Many Americans believe not only that Black mothers are likely to corrupt their children, but that Black children are predisposed to corruption. This trend is epitomized by the panic over "crack babies," Black infants irreparably damaged by their mothers' use of crack during pregnancy. It was erroneously reported that these children sustained neurological injuries that warped their emotional development, making them unresponsive as babies and uncontrollable as toddlers. Newspaper stories warned of a horde of Black children about to descend on inner-city kindergartens in need of high-cost special services.[50] But the brain damage crack babies sustained was supposed to cut even deeper: lacking an innate social conscience, crack babies were destined to grow up to be criminals.

As I discuss in Chapter 4, there is no good evidence to support this caricature of the crack baby. Nevertheless, the frightening image spawned a cottage industry of angry letters to the editor calling for harsh measures to keep crack addicts from having babies. "Reducing her welfare payments will not stop this woman from having babies," wrote one commentator. "The only way to stop her is the dreaded 'S' word—involuntary sterilization, either surgically or with Norplant. The other alternative is to allocate our resources to caring for unlim-

ited numbers of crack babies while other children continue to be without health care."[51] The figures cited are so astronomical that it seems as if most Black children in America are crack babies impaired by a host of defects. "By the end of the 1990s the first 'crack babies' will be entering their teens," a Michigan prosecutor predicted. "It is estimated that by the year 2000 about 4,000,000 citizens of the United States will have experienced *in utero* exposure to controlled substances."[52]

The stories about hopelessly defective crack babies represent a new kind of biodeterminism. Instead of transmitting immutable deficiencies through their genes, these poor Black mothers inflict similar damage *in utero*, "callously dooming a new generation to 'a life of certain suffering, of probable deviance, of permanent inferiority.'"[53] These negative predictions easily become self-fulfilling prophecies when adoptive parents are afraid to take home a crack baby, teachers expect the children to be incapable of learning, and legislators believe it is pointless to waste money on programs for children who cannot possibly achieve. The upshot of this version of Black biological inferiority is the same as its hereditary cousin, exemplified by *The Bell Curve*: since these children are unalterably defective, any attempt to improve their lives through social spending will be futile. Indeed, John Silber, the influential president of Boston University, "went so far as to lament the expenditure of so many health care dollars on 'crack babies who won't ever achieve the intellectual development to have consciousness of God.'"[54]

The new biodeterminism presents drugs, poverty, and race as interchangeable marks that inevitably consign Black children to a worthless future. The stories about crack babies always depict Black children and they often assume they are on welfare. As one reporter wrote, "Call them 'welfare babies,' 'crack babies,' 'at-risk babies,' or 'deficit babies'—by whatever term, they constitute a new *'bio-underclass'* of infants who are disadvantaged almost from the moment of conception."[55] In this author's mind, children exposed to crack, receiving welfare, or living a disadvantaged lifestyle are all the same and they are all biologically inferior—and they are all perceived to be Black. The primary concern of this sort of rhetoric is typically the huge cost these children impose on taxpayers, rather than the children's welfare. A letter on the editorial pages of the *Atlanta Journal*, for example, noted that, in addition to burdening society with the cost of hospital care, "[c]rack babies most often grow up in a culture of welfare dependency; there's the cost of adding their names to the welfare rolls."[56]

The powerful Western image of childhood innocence does not seem to benefit Black children. Black children are born guilty. The new bio-underclass constitutes nothing but a menace to society—criminals, crackheads, and welfare cheats waiting to happen. Blaming Black women for bringing up a next generation of degeneracy stigmatizes not only mothers but their children as well.

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Black motherhood has borne the weight of centuries of disgrace manufactured in both popular culture and academic circles. A lurid mythology of Black mothers' unfitness, along with a science devoted to proving Black biological inferiority, cast Black childbearing as a dangerous activity. This view has justified the regulation of every aspect of Black women's fertility, policies I describe in the next six chapters. It has also induced a deep suspicion in the minds of many Black Americans that white-dominated family-planning programs are a form of racial genocide. But the objective of reproductive control has never been primarily to reduce the numbers of Black children born into the world. It perpetuates the view that racial inequality is caused by Black people themselves and not by an unjust social order.